

Magazine scoops best air fares

Those searching for ways to cut travel expenses should consider a subscription to Best Fares, published monthly by Best Fares Inc. of Arlington, Texas. It lists "hidden city" air fares and other discount ticket prices that could save hundreds of dollars for frequent travelers.

"Hidden city" fares are the low fares that airlines offer to connecting cities so they can meet their competition's prices within a certain market. To make those fares competitive, airlines sometimes offer a lower fare to a destination that connects through one of their higher priced hub cities.

Best Fares claims that it can save travelers 30 percent to 70 percent "almost every time you fly." To save money on a flight from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, book a flight from Los Angeles to Boston on USAir, Best Fares advises, and simply get off when the plane stops in Philadelphia. You'll save \$320.

As a test, I called about a round-trip, coach-fare ticket between Denver and Portland, Ore., on Continental and was told it costs \$208.



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leg, I could save \$39.

Best Fares lists hundreds of similar "hidden" fares between scores of U.S. cities. Of course, just like every air ticket, there are restrictions. The biggest restriction with these fares is having to carry on your luggage — or it goes to Phoenix though you get off in Denver.

The magazine extends no guarantee about the information it publishes except to state that it was "derived from industry sources that are considered reliable." The brief checking I did made me conclude that if you're looking for discount fares, this resource is a good

place to start, but it's just the beginning of the work you have to do. Because fares and routes are always changing, you have to check up on every one you're interested in to be sure of the itinerary and the discount.

In addition, Best Fares lists all the latest discount and coach fares in and out of five major airports: Chicago's O'Hare, New York's LaGuardia, Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth and Los Angeles International. If you have business through any of these cities, just a glance through the magazine will give you the rundown on all the major airlines' discount seats and a feeling for the restrictions that apply. There's a brief glossary of service codes, but it's far from complete. You have to check with the airline to be sure of the restrictions for any given flight and fare.

I also liked the directory on the inside back page of toll-free phone numbers for airline, hotel and car rental reservations. It also lists the airlines' complaint phone numbers, which aren't toll-free.

A year's subscription to Best

Fares costs \$78 — not a big investment when you consider that you might be able to make it back in just one or two trips. But the hidden costs of using this business tool are in the legwork needed to make it cost-effective, whether you're looking for the best fare to one of the hub cities or searching for a cut-rate hidden fare. Someone in your office will have to learn how to use the magazine, check and double-check the fares and book the flights. That process can be time-consuming, and that's what travel agents are for.

The bottom line: If you travel infrequently, Best Fares probably won't save you enough to cover the subscription costs and the extra effort. But if you travel a lot and can get by with carry-on luggage, this magazine could pay for itself many times over.

Hillel Segal's column has been broadened to include evaluations of gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.